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FREIGHTER WILL CARRY FOOD, DRUGS

Departure Tomorrow Is Tentatively Planned For Vessel

By HELEN DELICH BENTLEY
[Maritime Editor of The Sun]

A Baltimore-based freighter was on a stand-by basis last night, ready to sail to Havana tomorrow night with medicines and food supplies demanded by Premier Fidel Castro in exchange for Cuban invasion prisoners.

The freighter is the S.S. African Pilot, now at the Bethlehem Steel Company's Key Highway Ship Repair Yard, where she docked Thursday to be deactivated and returned to the dead fleet of the Maritime Administration.

Back On Active Status

However, because of the turn of events over this weekend, with extensive meetings going on in Washington, New York and Miami, Fla., on the prisoner exchange, the ship was restored to an active status to wait for further orders. A crew has been ordered on stand-by, to report Monday afternoon and sail that night if all is completed. The National Maritime Union said it would supply the unlicensed seamen.

In New York, James E. Donovan, an attorney, who has been supervising the negotiations on behalf of the prisoners' families, said he knew nothing of a ship being held in readiness.

"Believe me," he said, "as far as I know, I am the only direct channel with Castro and I know nothing at all about any S.S. African Pilot being made ready."

"Extremely Optimistic"

He added, however, that he was still "extremely optimistic" that the prisoner exchange will be

made by Christmas. He said meetings on plans for the exchange have been going on almost continuously in New York, Miami and Washington.

In Washington, an official of the Red Cross, which is accepting donations of foodstuffs and medical supplies, said:

"There is nothing new to report. As far as I know, Baltimore has played no part in the negotiations. It is possible that this (placing the ship on stand-by) is a preparatory move just in case the prisoners are released."

However, another Red Cross source acknowledged that assembly of the supplies for shipment to Cuba has been undertaken by the Red Cross.

Final details concerning the prisoner exchange still remained uncertain, it was said, with Monday noon given as the deadline for closing the deal or dropping it altogether.

Administration Reluctant

Part of the uncertainty stems from the Administration's reluctance to become involved in the prisoner exchange in any way as a result of various Cuban crises, dating back to the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion in April, 1961, when the 1,113 men were taken prisoners.

Although without a crew at the moment, the African Pilot is ready to put to sea at any moment. She is tentatively scheduled to head for Miami to pick up \$13,000,000 worth of medicines and food and then sail to Havana. The prisoners are to be flown back.

The International Longshoremen's Association, which has been refusing to handle any ships or cargoes linked to Cuba, has said that its members would load

the ransom medicine and food if

requested officially by the Government to do so.

The African Pilot is still owned by the Farrell Lines, a private steamship company that has a Government subsidy for its sailings to South, West, and East Africa.

Because she only has staterooms aboard for twelve passengers, no attempt would be made, it is believed, to transport any of the passengers on the ship, although the run is a comparatively short one.

The tonnage of the medicines and foods could not be learned last night.